

THE

Madonna and Saints,

PAINTED IN FRESCO BY

OTTAVIANO NELLI,

IN THE CHURCH OF S. MARIA NUOVA AT GUBBIO.



GUBBIO.

IT would be difficult to find amongst the cities of central Italy one more picturesque or interesting than Gubbio, the ancient capital of Umbria. Built on a steep declivity of the Apennines, it still retains most of the architectural features of the middle ages, so characteristic of the period of Italian freedom—machicolated walls and towers, narrow streets, and a stately "Palazzo Pubblico," or Town-hall. Like other free cities which rose to power in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was distinguished for the magnificence of its public buildings, and for the protection which it extended to the fine arts. Its own chroniclers claim for one of

its citizens the honour of having founded a school of painting which exercised no small influence throughout Italy, and ultimately attaining to great eminence, was known as the Umbrian School.

Dante, in the *Purgatorio* (xi. 100), addresses in terms of friendship one Oderisi, or Oderigi, whom he calls "the honour of Agobbio, and of the art of illuminating"—

Oh, diss' io lui, non se' tu Oderisi,
L'onor d' Agobbio, e l'onor di quell' arte,
Ch' alluminare è chiamata in Parisi?

Notwithstanding the reputation which Oderigi thus appears to have enjoyed, but few authentic works of his hand have, as far as I am aware, been preserved.* Amongst his pupils was Guido or Guiduccio Palmerucci, who was born about the year 1280, four years later than Giotto. He seems to have abandoned missal painting, and to have been chiefly employed, as was the custom of the time, in decorating with frescoes the public buildings and churches of his native city, and of the neighbouring towns of Umbria. A head of St. Antony, the only remains of a sacred subject painted by him early in the 14th century under the arcade of the college of painters, still exists on the outside of the church of S. Maria at Gubbio. Two frescoes recently discovered in the church of S. Francesco, in the town of Cagli, are also attributed to him by Signor Bonfatti, the able and learned historian of Gubbio, who has published interesting materials for the illustration of the works of the Eugubian painters.†

* The miniatures of the "Ordo Officiorum Senensis Ecclesiarum" in the public library of Siena were executed by him in 1313, and the illuminations of some manuscripts in the Vatican are also, I believe, attributed to him.

† "Memorie Storiche di Ottaviano Nelli Pittore Eugubino, illustrate con documenti da Luigi Bonfatti." Gubbio, 1813.

A contract is still preserved, entered into between Palmerucci and the magistrates of Gubbio, by which the painter agrees to decorate with frescoes the interior of the Town-hall, then recently built by Matteo di Giovanuccio, called Gattapone, one of the most celebrated architects of his time, and a native of the city. Guido undertakes to complete the decoration of the great hall, in which an Annunciation of the Virgin had already been painted—it is not stated by whom—and to add thereto the arms of the captains and other officers of the "comune."⁴

Palmerucci's frescoes—for I know no authentic specimen of his easel pictures—are distinguished by certain qualities which may entitle him to be considered the founder of an independent school of painting. Still it is very doubtful whether his style was not formed under the influence of his great contemporary, Giotto, although Signor Boufatti condemns Lanzi and Rosini for classing him amongst the "Giotteschi," or imitators of that painter. It is scarcely probable that the impulse, which the illustrious Florentine had given to painting by his works at Assisi, should not have been felt in the neighbouring city of Gubbio. Few parts of Italy, indeed, escaped his influence, and there were few schools which in the beginning did not profit by his example. However, Palmerucci is not to be classed amongst his mere imitators, and the few fragments of his works with which I am acquainted are undoubtedly characterised by an attempt to impart that tenderness, grace, and religious sentiment to his forms,

* This document is included in a valuable collection of materials for the history of painting published at Bologna, and entitled "Memorie originali Italiane riguardanti le Belle Arti."

which subsequently became the well-known features of the Umbrian school.

One of Palmerucci's scholars, Martino Nelli, painted frescoes after the manner of his master, but of no great merit, in many churches and public buildings of Gubbio. Some fragments of them still remain. He appears to have had two sons, who were brought up in his "bottega." The one who distinguished himself the most in his art was Ottaviano, called after his father "di Martino Nelli;" a designation subsequently corrupted into "Ottaviano de Martis." The first record of his name occurs in a document preserved in the public archives of Perugia, to which city he was called in the first year of the 15th century, to paint the arms of Giovan Galeazzo, Duke of Milan, in company with Cristoforo di Nicoluccio, and Francesco di Antonio. He was paid eighty-four florins for his share of the work, which was probably more considerable and important than its professed subject would lead us to expect, groups of figures and elaborate ornaments being frequently added to armorial bearings thus painted on public buildings.

He appears to have remained but a short time in Perugia, for in 1403 he painted, for the noble family of Pinoli, the votive fresco in the church of S. Maria Nuova at Gubbio, representing the Madonna and Saints, of which a copy is included in the publication of the Arundel Society for 1857. The picture was probably ordered in fulfilment of a vow to the Virgin during the illness of a member of the family, or at the time of some public calamity. It was customary to make such vows to the Virgin, or to a patron Saint, and many of the finest frescoes and altar-pictures in Italy were thus

executed for cities and public corporations, as well as for private individuals.

In Nelli's fresco we find two figures kneeling before the Virgin—one a man advanced in years, the other a youth. They are evidently portraits of the persons for whom it was painted, and Signor Bonfatti conjectures that they represent Venturuccio dei Pinoli and his son Pinolo. The Virgin, clothed in robes richly embroidered in gold, is seated in front of a curtain held by angels. The Infant Christ, standing on her knee, and in the act of blessing with his right hand, stretches out his left to the younger of the two worshippers, who is conducted by a guardian angel to the Saviour. The other kneeling figure is presented to the Madonna by St. Antony the Abbot, his patron Saint. On the opposite side is a second Saint, probably St. Paul, holding a book in one hand, and a palm branch, the sign of martyrdom, in the other. The Almighty, supported above the Virgin by a cluster of angels and cherubim, holds a crown over her head. Angels, playing on instruments of music, complete the group. The ground of the picture is covered with a rich diaper pattern, varied with figures of birds and animals. The erection of a modern altar has injured the lower part of the fresco, and has destroyed the feet of the principal figures.

This fresco, of considerable merit, considering the time at which it was executed, is peculiarly interesting as being probably the first to unite in an eminent degree the principal characteristics of the school to which its author belongs. It is chiefly on this account that the Council of the Arundel Society has selected it for publication. There is nothing more instructive to the art-student than to trace

the gradual development of certain qualities and peculiarities of style which have ultimately been brought to high perfection by the great masters. This progressive improvement furnishes of itself a chapter to the history of the human intellect. By carefully studying it in the works of painters who followed each other in one school, we trace, as it were, the working of the mind, and follow the very steps of the process. Thus we find in Nelli's fresco the germ of nearly all those beauties, and peculiar characteristics, which subsequently distinguished the masterpieces of Pietro Perugino, and still more of his pupil Raphael. There is the same feeling for rich and glowing colour, the same devotional sentiment, the same grace in the attitudes and forms of the human figure, the same tender and melancholy expression in the heads, the same warm, harmonious flesh tints, so different from those of the Florentine school. The technical skill, the power of rendering truthfully and completely all that the painter feels, is alone wanting to render the work almost perfect of its kind. In the head of the Virgin, especially, we trace the type of the Madonnas of Perugino and Raphael; and types such as these mark, perhaps more than anything else, the character of a school. Of this head, singularly beautiful and pathetic in its extreme simplicity, a tracing from the original has been added—the Council of the Arundel Society desiring to afford additional means of judging of the peculiar style of the artist by reproducing, as correctly as possible, outlines of the principal heads. The figure of the Infant Christ is the most defective part of the fresco. The expression of the head is befitting the subject, but the drawing of the nude, which is in parts slightly veiled by thin white drapery, is incorrect and cramped, showing the usual faults of works of the period. There

is much dignity and religious feeling in the heads of the two Saints. The angels playing on musical instruments are arch, dainty little figures, full of artless grace, reminding one of the angels of Fra Angelico or Gentile da Fabriano. The disposition of the group shows that the painter had not released himself from the conventional treatment of religious subjects prescribed in the 14th century.*

The general tone of colour in the fresco is singularly rich and harmonious, and has earned for it the name by which it is known to the people of Gubbio, of the "Madonna del Belvedere." It is one of the very few works of the beginning of the 15th century which is still, except where destroyed by a modern erection, in almost perfect preservation. It owes its present condition partly to having been long covered with glass, as an object of peculiar devotion to the inhabitants of the city, but principally to the material in which it is painted. There is a brilliancy, transparency, and solidity in the colours, and a compactness and a property of resisting decay in the "intonaco" or prepared plaster, which produce the effect of a painting in "smalto" or encaustic. Hence the material in which the fresco is painted, and the mode of its application, are well deserving of careful examination. The process employed appears to me to have differed in many respects from any other method of fresco painting with which I am acquainted.

The drawing from which the chromolithograph has been executed was made by Mrs. Higford Burr. It reproduces with feeling and

* An engraving, in outline, of Nelli's fresco, in which neither the spirit nor character of the original has been preserved, is included amongst the plates to Rosini's "Storia della Pittura."

truth the work of the painter, without diminishing its beauties, or exaggerating its defects or its peculiarities. Nothing is more easy than to make a coarse caricature of an early painting; nothing more difficult than to convey that love for the true and beautiful, and that struggle to embody them, which characterise the productions of the really great masters of the 14th and 15th centuries, and give them, in spite of incorrect drawing and conventional treatment, their peculiar charm. In England the works of the painters of this period are scarcely known, except through spurious easel pictures or indifferent copies. It is almost impossible to make those who never saw their frescoes appreciate their real beauties, or understand the effect they produced upon those for whom they were expressly painted. There can be no greater error than to suppose that their principal merit consists in the mere realistic treatment of details. It is the sacrifice of the ideal to this subordinate quality which has principally contributed to the failure of modern attempts to imitate the manner of the early masters, and to introduce what is commonly known as "Christian art."

Ottaviano Nelli painted chiefly in fresco, and executed many works in that material in the churches of his native place, and of the neighbouring cities of Umbria. In the church of S. Maria Nuova of Gubbio, are the remains of a "Crucifixion," which still displays, in its warm colouring, and in the tender expression and sentiment of the heads of the Magdalen and Angels, the peculiar manner of the master. On the walls of the choir of the church of S. Agostino, in the same city, he painted various subjects from the history of the titular saint, some of which, such as his ordination, consecration as bishop, and the death of S. Monnica, have considerable merit. A Holy Family,

in the church of S. Maria della Piaggiola, outside the walls of Gubbio, was probably one of his last works. It is still preserved, although much injured by bad restoration. Signor Bonfatti, who has collected, with laudable diligence, such records as exist of the various works executed by Nelli, has described a church in Gubbio, whose walls were covered with his frescoes and those of the principal painters of the school, who flourished from the commencement of the 14th to the 16th century. They were destroyed as late as the year 1841 !

Of his works in other parts of Umbria, a Christ surrounded by Angels, painted about the year 1422, may still be seen at Assisi, on the outside of the chapel of the ancient Hospice of the "Pellegrini." A small chapel in the palace of the noble family of Trinci at Foligno was decorated by him in fresco in 1424, as appears by an inscription still partly preserved. Some of the subjects seem to have been executed by his pupils, others are undoubtedly by his own hand. They are somewhat weak in general treatment, but are distinguished by his peculiar clear, warm colouring. The entire building has been converted into Government offices, and the chapel itself having been long used as a lumber-room, the frescoes have been suffered to fall into partial decay. Like many other great painters of the time, he was drawn to Urbino by the munificence and splendour of a Court which extended the utmost protection and encouragement to the arts. But all the works which he executed in that city have either perished altogether, or have long been buried beneath plaster and whitewash.

The easel paintings of Ottaviano Nelli are extremely rare. I

am only acquainted with two ;—one representing the Virgin delivering a child from the hands of an evil spirit, in the church of S. Agostino in Gubbio, almost entirely repainted ; and a second, of the same subject, at Montefalco, near Foligno. They are both, as is usual with masters of the period, far inferior to his works in fresco. The latest record of the name of the painter is found in a document dated in the month of April, 1444. It is conjectured that he died soon after this period.

Amongst the painters of the Umbrian school who were influenced by the works of Ottaviano Nelli, if they may not be classed amongst his immediate scholars, the most remarkable were Gentile da Fabriano, and Giovanni Sanzio, the father of Raphael. The former painted much in Gubbio,* and he is believed to have assisted Nelli in decorating the choir of the church of S. Agostino, two of the subjects being pointed out, though probably on no good authority, as exclusively by him. There is certainly much in common in the manner of both masters, especially in the profusion of gold and ultramarine in their draperies ; in their warm, rich colouring ; in the arch and playful countenances of their angels ; and in the modest devotional expression of their Virgins. The influence of the Etruscan painter upon Giovanni Sanzio has been more generally recognised by writers on Italian art. Rosini, indeed, does not hesitate to admit the probability of Nelli having been his master.† It is chiefly in the easel pictures of Sanzio that the influence may be traced. In his frescoes, especially in his masterpiece at Cagli, he had formed a style far in advance of the age, and more nearly

* Vasari, "Vita di Gentile da Fabriano."

† "Storia della Pittura." Part iii., p. 163.

approaching that afterwards brought to its highest perfection by his illustrious son.

Ottaviano Nelli left many scholars, who were chiefly employed in adorning the public edifices of their native city. Their names, and a record of their principal works, have been preserved by his biographer. But none of them rose to eminence, or are known beyond the limits of the district in which they laboured.* By the end of the 15th century the school of Gubbio, like those of the neighbouring cities, seems to have been absorbed into that which Pietro Vannucci had founded in Perugia, and which, uniting the highest qualities of all the Umbrian schools, produced the greatest painter of modern times, Raphael Sanzio.

A. H. LAYARD.

* The principal were Giacomo di Bedi, Giovanni Pitali, and Domenico di Cecio di Baldo. Ottaviano's brother's name was Tommasuccio. A "tavola" by him is in the church of S. Domenico at Gubbio.

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